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ABSTRACT

The Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center located at Virginia Commonwealth University serves various professional development needs of adult education practitioners throughout the state. In order to determine whether the center was providing the professional development resources, information, and services that the state's adult education practitioners wanted, a study was conducted to ask the question, "Why do adult education practitioners use a state literacy resource center?" Data were collected from three administrators, one program manager, two regional specialists, and four classroom teachers. All were Caucasian females ranging in age from the late 30s to the early 50s. Two group interviews were conducted (one with the administrators and the other with the teachers), and e-mail messages were collected. The study found five main reasons why practitioners use the center: (1) to receive information about off-site conferences and workshops; (2) to access on-site staff development and training opportunities; (3) to borrow from the lending library; (4) to access project and grant information; and (5) to receive referral information. The study concluded that the center works well to serve practitioners' needs and that it should keep doing what it is doing, especially offering access to conferences. (KC)

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Reasons Practitioners Use a State Literacy Resource Center

Donald Finn

Virginia Adult Education Research Network
Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

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Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

Reasons Practitioners Use a State Literacy Resource Center

Donald Finn, Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center

Background

The Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center located at Virginia Commonwealth University serves various professional development needs of adult education practitioners throughout the state. In my position as the center's Field Services Coordinator, which I have held since July 1999, I have frequent interaction with the field. After a few months on the job, I began to wonder if our center was providing the professional development resources, information, and services that Virginia's adult education practitioners desired. My curiosity had been piqued after interacting with practitioners at two statewide adult education conferences, and after conducting several workshops on developing and carrying out professional development plans, a project that is one of my primary responsibilities. Around the time that my curiosity had been raised, the application for the Virginia Adult Education Research Network came across my desk. Eureka! I had an avenue to take! The journey began . . .

Inquiry

Why do adult education practitioners use a state literacy resource center?

Action

In order to understand the situation, I set out on my journey by focusing on the types of requests that practitioners were making of me. I used this information to determine the main reasons that practitioners use the resource center. My journey caused me to focus specifically on what the practitioners with whom I have contact were thinking.

Data Collection

I began my data collection by contacting individual practitioners to ask if they would be interested in taking part in my study. Three administrators, one program manager, two Regional Specialists, and four classroom teachers accepted my invitation. The participants ended up being white females ranging in age from the late 30's to early 50's. I set up two interviews; one group was made up of the administrators and the other was comprised of the teachers. By separating the participants by job description I thought I would get a better feel for the issues that were important to each group and I would be able to determine if the needs were different for each group. I also felt the separation would allow both groups to speak of their needs and concerns in a manner that would not offend, isolate, or intimidate the other group. I prepared one set of questions to ask both groups. The questions focused on how these practitioners currently used our services and what they thought a resource center of their own design might look like.

I conducted my first interview on February 18, 2000. The group consisted of the three administrators, whose combined years of experience in adult education totaled approximately 39 with the greatest number of years being 19 and the least being 4. I chose the participants for this group from the resource center database that listed them among the top 12 users of our services. The second interview, with the teachers, occurred on March 7, 2000. This interview did not turn out as expected because only two were able to attend. The two teachers' combined adult education experience was 12 years. I had chosen them from a roll of participants who would be attending a technology camp that our center was sponsoring.

In addition to the interviews, I collected every e-mail message that I received from practitioners as well as my replies to those messages for a period of one month. The total number of messages was 42. I gathered the e-mails as a way to

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collect the perceptions of a larger audience of practitioners. In addition to the e-mail data, I printed and analyzed all 58 announcements that I posted on the Virginia Adult Education and Literacy Network (VAELN), over my first eight months of employment at the resource center. The rationale behind collecting the announcements was to help me track the types of information that I offered to the practitioners through the discussion list.

Findings

I found five main reasons why practitioners use The Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center.

To receive information about offsite conferences and workshops:

Typically, practitioners seek registration, contact, and cost information for workshops that are offered nationally and by other Virginia-based organizations. During the interview, a program administrator referred to becoming aware of an upcoming national conference as a result of a VAELN posting and shared her plans to attend. Our presence at statewide conferences scored high with both groups. They like that we not only sponsor or co-sponsor some of these conferences, but also that we set up display tables containing samples of materials (on the theme of the conference if possible) from our lending library. Our visibility at conferences also lessens the frustrations that some practitioners have because of their geographic distance from our physical location.

To access onsite staff development and training opportunities:

The Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center offers onsite workshop training. These workshops are conducted by resource center staff or by individuals from across Virginia who are contracted to conduct workshops on behalf of the resource center. In addition to carrying out the training, we also provide funding for the workshops. When asked what services she would incorporate into a state resource center of her own design, one administrator said, "I would be sure that there was a big pot of funds for projects — area and regional projects." Another of the administrators noted that having a resource center staff member visit a site to conduct a training or to give an informational seminar on our services carried a great deal of weight with the teachers. She spoke of a former administrative colleague who became frustrated trying to accurately convey to her teachers the mission and services of the resource center. Her colleague ended up inviting a resource center staff member to a teachers meeting to deliver an informational workshop. To the pleasure of the administrator, she believed that her teachers became well-informed about the center as a result of the personal visit. "I think it is more effective if you come out and tell the teachers about you rather than if we tell them about you."

To borrow from the lending library:

Practitioners borrow professional, instructional, and administrative materials from the center. Our library catalog can be accessed through a personal visit to the resource center or through our web site. "Making sure that I can make the deadline to get them boxed up and returned" was one problem that was brought out in the interviews.

To access project and grant information:

Information on project and grant opportunities are posted by the resource center on VAELN and on the web site. Information on repeating grants is published and regularly updated on the center's web site, which includes links to the organizations offering the grants.

To receive referral information:

Our center receives e-mails and phone calls from teachers, administrators, and sometimes students, asking for referral information about other programs. Referral needs range from finding a site where a GED preparation class may be offered, to locating a copy of a particular book, newsletter, or journal article. "I like to call [the center] and say, 'Where can I find information on ___?' Then they can direct me to the appropriate person or organization." This statement reflects a consensus among interviewees and of many practitioners who have contacted me personally for referral information. Turning to a central location with their questions is convenient.

I found it interesting that both the teacher and the administrative groups liked the personal touch that our organization and I offer. That we

provide information, newsletters, and reports of special center projects and programs, as well as other center publications, scored high with the interview groups as did our "most famous" promotional materials like our pens and pencils. Each group appreciated how the center has utilized computer technology in its operations, particularly e-mail and our web site, as a means of passing on information.

Implications and Future Directions

Through this project it has become clear to me that to assist the field in positive and innovative ways, we must listen to what the practitioners are saying. What also stands out to me is that our center does things well and we need to keep doing what we do well, particularly organizing, funding, and leading professional development workshops. The Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center also needs to continue having a visible presence in the field, particularly at conferences and workshops. We need to continue riding the crest of the technology wave, being sure to examine innovative ways to distribute our services and publications and being technological leaders, particularly in the ongoing development and improvement of our web site. Because there remains some lack of awareness of what we provide, I need to focus on better ways to get the message of the resource center out to those practitioners who may not utilize our services.

As a result of my participation in the Research Network I have a much clearer understanding of the value of practitioner inquiry. This understanding will help me to better lead the state's adult education practitioners through their own professional development plan process. I have found that using research methods to answer questions is extremely beneficial. I am now thinking of new questions to answer through the research process. And so, the journey continues... ❑

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

Practitioner Research Briefs were published by the Virginia Adult Education Research Network, a project operated from the Arlington Education and Employment Program, within the Department of Adult, Career, and Vocational Education in the Arlington Public Schools. The Virginia Adult Education Research Network supports practitioner research as staff development. In practitioner research groups of teachers, tutors, and administrators use qualitative inquiry methods to systematically explore issues or problems in their own practice. Through the brief reports they write practitioner researchers contribute to both theory and practice in the adult education and literacy field.

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